

Global Immigration alert

February 2026

Canada

Express Entry 2026: Prioritizing top talent and critical skills

Executive summary

Canada has announced targeted updates to its economic immigration framework for 2026, reinforcing a strategic shift toward attracting top global talent and more closely aligning permanent residence selection with labor market needs. The changes were announced by The Honourable Lena Metlege Diab, Canada's Minister of Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship, on 18 February 2026.

The 2026 Express Entry categories are intended to address ongoing skills shortages in priority sectors, while also attracting and retaining high-impact talent expected to make significant contributions to Canada's economy. More broadly, the expanded categories advance key public policy objectives by strengthening economic resilience and reinforcing Canada's sovereignty and critical supply chains through targeted immigration pathways for transportation occupations and skilled military-specific roles.

Key developments

Under Canada's Express Entry category-based selection model, IRCC conducts targeted invitation rounds for candidates who meet specific economic objectives. First introduced in 2023, category-specific invitation rounds complement the general and program specific draws. The Minister announced the creation of five new categories that should have their own invitation rounds in 2026. New categories introduced for 2026 are:

- Senior managers (executives) with Canadian work experience
- Physicians with Canadian work experience
- Researchers with Canadian work experience

- Transport occupations
- Skilled military Recruits

Existing categories continuing from prior years include:

- French-language proficiency
- Healthcare and social services occupations
- Skilled trade occupations
- Science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) occupations
- Education occupations

Category-specific rounds typically have a lower points threshold for an invitation compared to general rounds as the pool of eligible candidates is smaller, providing candidates with a higher chance of being invited.

Analysis and recommendations

The creation of the new categories is welcome news to many who are currently not competitive for a general round invitation. Senior executives - who were significantly disadvantaged by the elimination of Arranged Employment points - now have a clear pathway towards an Express Entry invitation. All candidates in Express Entry should review the new categories and ensure their profiles are up to date to be eligible for these new invitation rounds. Individuals who are not currently in Express Entry should submit their profiles as soon as possible as the first rounds of new category-specific invitations are expected to start next week.

While these new categories represent new opportunities for Express Entry candidates, the frequency of these category-specific invitations and the number of invitations per round will ultimately determine their impact. Since the creation of the first category-specific rounds in 2023, not all categories have been treated equally. Some categories have had many more invitation rounds with larger numbers of invitations in each round compared to others. We will continue to closely monitor each Express Entry invitation round to observe patterns and provide analysis.

Individuals who do not qualify under the new or existing categories will continue to rely on the general rounds for an invitation. These candidates will likely face higher points requirements in the general rounds as the category-specific invitation rounds disrupt the occurrence of general rounds.

In addition to the new Express Entry categories, the Minister referenced ongoing review of the Express Entry system and the Comprehensive Ranking System (CRS) that awards points to candidates. The elimination of the Arranged Employment in March 2025 was the last major change to the CRS. While no specific changes were announced on 18 February, any change to CRS scoring will impact all Express Entry candidates and their competitiveness for an invitation.

For employers, particularly those operating in priority sectors and employing targeted occupations, the 2026 Express Entry priorities may enhance both access to and predictability of permanent residence pathways for their skilled foreign worker population. Employers should, however, expect increased scrutiny around occupation classification and the alignment of candidates' work experience with the applicable Express Entry categories and occupations.

Key steps

EY will continue to monitor these developments. Should you have any questions, we encourage you to contact one of our immigration professionals.

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